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Jacques Lizot

Excerpt

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Prologue

The stranger had started on his way. He had announced:

Mother, I am going to hunt the wild pig.
Go, my son, and kill a great many.

He had sharpened several darts cut from a bamboo stalk and painted their tips with curare, then had gone to a steep rock called “the rock of the menstruating woman.” There he had cut a hollow cane to fashion a blowgun, which was obviously not made to last for it came from too soft a stalk.

When he was ready he entered the forest and walked a good while before he was alerted by muffled sounds as of blows. He walked toward the noise and stealthily approached a Yanomami who was busy taking hard-shelled fruits from a heap next to him and knocking them against a large tree root. The stranger remained hidden in the thicket; he watched a long time before loading a dart into his blowgun. The dart streaked into the Indian’s eye. The killer then waited for his victim to die before loading him onto his shoulders.

His mother was pregnant. When she saw him return, walking heavily because of the burden he was carrying, she cried out happily:

Oh, my son has killed a wild pig!

She was rejoicing: She had a passion for human flesh. They quartered the body and boiled it. A young boy was living with them; no one knew who he was. When the meat was cooked they ate voraciously until they had their fill, and there soon remained only bones, which emitted a strange sound when they threw them out. It was something like: *terere* . . . And it could be heard throughout the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, in the great circular shelter, the Yanomami were growing anxious about the man whose return was so long delayed. When they started their search for their companion they suspected a jaguar. Their quest was unsuccessful at first; then they discovered some tracks: recently broken saplings, footprints, scattered husks, and abandoned fruits. They also saw other tracks: the killer’s. These sank deep into the ground where it was soft. They followed them and found the strangers’ dwelling. The heap of bones filled

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them with dread: They suddenly realized what had been their companion's fate. They got ready for combat, fastened their arrowheads on their shafts, and scattered. The stranger fought back with his blowgun; his darts made a snapping sound as he blew them out. They killed him and invaded his dwelling. When she saw them the woman became mad with rage; she pulled off her necklaces and their parts scattered all over the ground.

One of them took the foreign woman for a wife. As for the boy, he was adopted and grew up among them, so that they finally considered him one of their own. One day the boy declared that he wanted to go and find fire stones. He asked that a Yanomami boy go with him: His intention was to eat him once they were far away. They went to the place of the stones and started to dig them up. Then, with a stone he had specially chosen for its sharpness, he struck his companion on the head with all his might and killed him. He cut the body into small pieces, wrapped them in leaves for cooking, and did not return to the great communal shelter until he had eaten everything. He was glutted with human flesh. When she saw him return alone, the child's mother asked:

Where is my son?

The young stranger remained silent at first. His only answer was to tap the edges of his incisors with his index finger. Their first reaction was to disbelieve the evidence. Some adult males asked that he lead them to the place of the crime. They found burned-out embers, charred leaves, and loathsome remains. Filled with grief and rage, the victim's father decapitated the young stranger.

This story is instructive concerning the Yanomami's view of their neighbors and of strangers in general – whether Indian or white – whom they frequently accuse of the crime of cannibalism. Ethnocentricity, which is so damaging to our research but so difficult to avoid, is not at all an attitude characteristic only of technological civilizations imbued with their alleged superiority: One can find evidence of it most everywhere if one is willing to recognize it. In order to perpetuate itself in time and maintain that internal logic which enables it to exist, every civilization needs to confer value upon itself and to this end needs to disparage ever so slightly its neighboring cultures. We can perhaps perceive in that need the reason for this almost universal attitude. In an extreme situation, an ethnic group that might have too flattering an image of other groups would be forced to work certain necessary transformations upon itself in order to prevent an unbearable contradiction. What we call acculturation sometimes has no other roots.

We can better understand the tendency of ethnic groups to call themselves by a name that, in their language, means simply “man,” “folk,” or something to that effect. That is very precisely the meaning of the word *yanomami*. The

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ethnic group is the central focus of the human universe; it is humanity par excellence, around which everything must necessarily converge or gravitate. For a Yanomami, anything that doesn't belong to his own sociocultural world is necessarily alien, *nabë*. The words *yanomami* and *nabë* form both a pair and an opposition. The *nabë* are first of all Indians of other ethnic groups, but also people of mixed blood and whites, all of whom are lumped together into the same category of creatures who deserve no respect; they are also the enemies, for the stranger is in fact a potential enemy, good only for robbing and attacking, an object of derision, reduced to the level of a subhumanity that is both despised and feared, guilty of the blackest misdeeds.

It follows that the Yanomami accuse foreigners, whites, of a practice that in their eyes truly amounts to an abomination, a hideous crime: eating human flesh. Their religious thought and their mythical world are full of this ever-present threat, this disquieting shadow: cannibalism, whether actual or symbolic. For the Yanomami, every death is conceived as a cannibalistic act; death occurs when the soul has been eaten by a supernatural or human being.

The story that prefaces these remarks springs no doubt from an ideology: It is a product of the imagination, even though some of its elements might have been transposed. It will now be interesting to observe these same Indians as they are confronted by a historical event and to find out how they interpret it.

The following story takes place sometime between 1940 and 1945. Several communities of the present-day central Yanomami, driven back by numerous and enterprising enemies, had just settled in the vicinity of the "river of rains," not far from the swift-running Shitoya, at a place called Thorabë. At that very spot the river ceases to be navigable upstream.

No one knows where the whites had come from. They had traveled upstream in large dugout canoes and were stopped by the rocks. They had traveled a long time to get there: They propelled their boats by paddling and by pushing them on poles that they thrust into the sand. They settled right on the riverbank, clearing an area large enough to build a rectangular dwelling with a gable roof. They had come to extract latex from the rubber trees and began to exploit the surrounding forest. They had enormous kettles under which fires burned at all times.

When we first heard it, the news of their arrival terrified us and we stayed away. But, pushed by curiosity, we grew bolder: We would watch them through the leaves. In those days we had no metal axes, though a few of us owned some miserable pieces of machete fastened to wooden handles with bowstring. But the foreigners used machetes, axes, and knives: We had never seen so many. They also had big dogs that frightened us, but that we would have liked to have for ourselves. One day the bravest among us decided to visit the whites. The first meetings were friendly; in spite of all these objects that we coveted, we did not yet dare to steal. We bartered fruits and manioc, and, squatting down a safe distance away from the big kettles full of heavily bubbling latex, we would throw pieces of wood and balls of earth against their sides, which rang out with a terrifying noise: *tin, tin* . . . From their insides rose a worrisome smoke: It gave birth to the *Shawara* demons who make their way

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into human bodies where they inflict pain, provoke disease and shortly death if the shamans are powerless to cast them out. Several of our children died; we knew it was because of the kettles and the whites.

Some time later, Karinahusi, Shinanokawë's father, pretended to exchange his son for a large dog that the whites were offering him. The beast was truly desirable: It was big and long-legged, its jowls hung low. In those days we had almost no dogs, and none of those we owned could compare to that magnificent animal. The foreigners had given us to understand that they wanted Shinanokawë to work in their enterprise. At the time the exchange took place, father and son had agreed on a plan: Shinanokawë was to run away as soon as night fell. That did not prove difficult for him; he waited for his masters to doze off, slipped into the forest, and stayed under cover till dawn, vaguely bothered by the thought that a jaguar might be stalking in the vicinity. Then he returned to his people.

After this deception we stayed away for fear of reprisals, but we couldn't stop thinking about the metal tools: We hadn't given up the idea of devising some trick to get our hands on them. We let some time go by before venturing again to the whites' encampment in order to gauge their reaction. When they saw us, they didn't seem angry because of the trick we had played on them. We judged them to be miserly with their possessions, and that irritated us. Previously, at night, men of influence and feared warriors had addressed us at length to incite us to stealing: We shouldn't be afraid of these few miserable foreigners, they said. And besides, those vile kettles caused death.

A group of visitors arrived from Wëtanami; they were our relatives and allies and had lived with us in the same shelter. We had parted because of a quarrel concerning the women. Wëtanami is the place where we got the earthen pots in which we cooked our food; near that site there are beds of fine clay. Taking advantage of the visitors' presence, some young men decided on an expedition to rob the whites. Some spoke to incite them, others to urge caution: They accepted the words of encouragement and ignored the prudent counsels. In spite of my youth – I was still a child – I joined them. When we arrived at the *nabë's* shelter, I was so frightened that I stayed at a distance. The whites spoke to us in their language, we replied in ours, and there was little understanding. One of the foreigners noticed me and walked toward me; panic swept over me and I almost took to my heels.

My companions did not hurry matters, so as to allay the whites' mistrust. We had taken along some green plantain bananas that we roasted on the embers. We had hidden in the forest a chip of stone to sharpen the stolen machetes. While the strangers went about their business and no longer took any notice of us, we stole metal objects that we hid under water by pushing them into the sand near the bank; it was the dry season, the water was very low. My elder brother signaled to me and said:

Let's go, I have a machete. Let's not stay any longer: I'm afraid.

The men from Wëtanami had taken clothing. That was too obvious; the whites noticed it and wanted everything returned. As we were refusing, one of them drew a pistol and fired on a foolhardy fellow who had lingered behind. He didn't die, but his upper arm was shattered: The injured limb hung limp, oddly turned backward. We ran for our shelter in a panic:

We were attacked by the foreigners!

The older men were furious and wanted immediate revenge.

The moon died. Another "settled" in the sky. One morning a young man went hunting. It was the season when the male curassows sing out morning and night the unvaried notes that attract the females: they "weep," and their moans alert the hunters

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who post themselves where the birds roost, waiting to kill them at daybreak. So, the hunter set out; it was dark and he waved in front of him a bunch of glowing sticks to light his way. He stopped every so often to revive the fire and listen for noises. He heard no curassow “weep,” but at dawn he happened on the whites. As they hadn’t noticed him, he took cover behind a tree and shot a harpoon-tipped arrow through a *nabé*’s throat. When he arrived home, out of breath for having run without stopping, he cried out:

I’ve shot an enemy!

Presently he vomited fat and hair, so he inferred that his victim had died and that he had “eaten” his soul.

We found out later that the whites had left; they had drifted downstream and had abandoned their dwelling. They were never seen again. The injured man’s arm took a long time to heal and remained deformed. One can still make out the site of the *nabé*’s dwelling: grass has grown on it.

After Shitoya, last of the rapids, the “river of rains” lazily unwinds its countless loops before losing itself in the Orinoco. Twenty years have passed. T^horabé has changed its name to Karohi and has moved far downstream to escape the murderous attacks of its enemies. The inhabitants have built their dwelling – they call it *shabono* – at the river’s edge, on a rise to escape the floods. It is a large circular roof of wood and leaves that shelters all the households, leaving in the center a vast plaza open to the sky. The gardens enfold the shelter; beyond, the forest covers a vast, rolling plain.

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PART I

The great shelter from day to day

1

Ashes and tears

It is not yet daylight. The river seems to have stayed its flow. Only a few eddies quicken the water's surface. Curls of light fog float lazily, almost motionless. Not a breath of air. Toward morning the humidity had condensed in the thick layers of foliage overhead: Now it drips down in large, noisy drops like a steady rainfall. Here and there a toucan spills out the brief notes of its monotonous song. The morning chill has become more biting; the Indians stir the fires, and showers of sparks fly up to the roof. The sun, rising above the horizon, will soon illuminate the tops of the highest trees. The great shelter of Karohi slowly comes to life: Voices seek answering voices, children weep, hammocks swing, set in motion by stirring bodies.

Without rising, men sharpen and perfect the bamboo arrowheads they had rough-cut the day before. For this morning, Turaewë, the shaman, is going to make curare: They must not run short of arrowheads. That night they were to abstain from lovemaking; during the day it will be forbidden to bathe or to eat until the curare maker has finished his work. The poison makes its demands; to be effective it imposes observance of its rules.

Now Turaewë rises. It is high time if he wants to avoid being overtaken by the rising sun. With a piece of charcoal he traces circles around his wrists and arms. Lest the noxious vapors of the curare give the small children sudden and violent diarrhea, mothers wrap a broad band of bark around their loins. Turaewë takes down a package from below the roof. He tears the wrapping; it contains scrapings from a liana. The shaman pours these onto some leaves; then he plucks some fibers from his hammock, sets them on fire, thrusts them into the scrapings, which first flare up and then die down as soon as the fibers are burned out. The same procedure must be repeated several times; the heap of scrapings must be stirred until it is dry enough to burn by itself. When he is satisfied that the scrapings are properly charred, Turaewë sits down; he encloses the bark between his palms, which he squeezes between his thighs so as to rub them with greater force; while doing this he recites the propitiatory invocation:

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toward the celestial disk
 where the lightning bursts
 you, *shokoriwë*,
 close the glans of your penis.
kushë ha! kushë ha!

This is to secure the favor of *shokoriwë*, the Tamandua Spirit. If he sprinkles his urine on the curare, he makes the poison ineffective.

The liana shavings are reduced to powder. Upon the shaman's request, Hitisiwë brings fresh scrapings of another liana, which the young man collected the day before. After these have been quickly dried out on the fire, they are coarsely crushed and mixed with the first batch. Meanwhile Turaewë fashions a cone of leaves in which he places the mixture, while Hitisiwë heats some water on the fire. The cone is fastened onto a stand about fifteen centimeters above the ground, and the shuddering water is poured in small doses from a calabash. Soon a coffee-like liquid drips from the bottom of the cone, along the main rib of a leaf positioned for that purpose: It is the curare.

One after another the men come up to draw their allotted portion of the poison. Then they go home, and, armed with small, soft brushes, they concentrate on painting a succession of contiguous dabs on the arrowheads placed over glowing embers to dry up the liquid. Hebewë complains of a headache, and his father takes this as proof of the poison's virulence.

Hebewë is an adolescent about fifteen years old. Despite his headache – perhaps no sooner announced than forgotten – he banters with some boys his own age. They keep their voices low: Excessive noise is detrimental to the curare. Everyone promises to all and sundry that they will exterminate the current archenemies, the *mahekoto-rëri*. The Yanomami's curare is primarily intended for warlike expeditions, even if it is sometimes used to kill the big spider monkeys. Most groups have a specialist to make it, but the substance, drawn from a plant with a very localized habitat, is the object of a very lively trade among allied communities. The product used by Turaewë comes from upriver.

On that particular day, the men are so absorbed in their work that they leave to the women the whole task of seeing to the food and firewood. When they have finished painting their arrowheads, the warriors place them with great care into quivers tightly sealed with animal skins.

The following night, Hitisiwë feels feverish; his limbs grow heavy, his stomach hurts. Everyone is asleep; he doesn't complain, and no one takes any notice of him. In the morning he wants to get up, but he is overcome with dizziness and has to lie down again. Two days later the young man has an ugly, dry cough. He can't hold his head erect and speaks with great effort. Worried now, an older brother asks Turaewë to step in. As Hitisiwë can nei-

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Hebëwë at age fourteen.

ther stand nor sit, they stretch a hammock for him near the place where the shaman habitually inhales his hallucinogens.

Hebëwë's father, Kaōmawë, and Shimoreiwë join Turaewë. These two are shamans of lesser importance, especially Shimoreiwë, whom they mock behind his back: Isn't it true, they ask, that his specialty is treating dogs? A few men who are not shamans also come to sit as spectators or to participate

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in the taking of the drugs. Resting their heels on pieces of wood, they sit down on logs. Each shaman has someone blow several doses into his nostrils by means of a hollow cane. Turaewë's eyes fill with tears; soon he is under the sway of the drugs. In Karohi he is the most knowledgeable, the most powerful of the shamans, and he will direct the cure. Presently his lips vibrate: They utter the call to the *hekura*, the forest spirits who are his allies in the fight against disease. The summoned *hekura* soon appear. Turaewë himself ceases to be an ordinary man; he *is hekura* and acts accordingly, singing and dancing before the patient while pacing a straight line back and forth with lithe and graceful steps. In this manner he marks out the path of the spirits. The shaman's arms sometimes hang loose, sometimes rise outward, away from his body, or come together above his head. His chant follows the rhythm of his pacing:

Tokori tree
with whose leaves
we, the *hekura*,
paint our bodies.
You, great white tapir,
great silvery tapir hidden by the dusk.
Tokori tree, your tender leaves bend down to the water,
your mouth is clothed in white down,
your white-downed gaping mouth that blows out the wind.

Turaewë scrutinizes the face of the patient whom he is deciphering. He wants to see what ill afflicts him and saps his health, and he discovers the nasty black bees, the *shāki kē na*, that feed on spoiled meat and offal. Their foul honey has blocked the patient's vital organs and intestines; thousands of voracious mandibles are about to eat his soul. Turaewë, ever watchful, interprets the symptoms; he explains the insects' slow but inexorable work, the tearing bites, the secretion of sticky honey that spreads, enfolds the internal organs, and, even now, is responsible for the patient's deafness.

Now that the illness is named, defined, localized, he must fight it without delay, and, to this end, he must call to the rescue the greatest, the most powerful of the *hekura*, who alone can help achieve the victory of uprooting the illness.

Turaewë places his hands visor-like above his eyes and stares at an imaginary line at right angles to the patient. Standing on his toes, he examines a spot that remains invisible to a man not endowed with his faculties. Suddenly he finds what he is seeking and cries out:

Oh, you, the grotesque! Giant Armadillo Spirit, come to me!

And all around, the spectators laugh at the evocation of that unlovely animal. But the *hekura* is in no hurry; he has not yet left his rocky abode. Turaewë repeats his summons:

Giant Armadillo Spirit, descend into me!